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"American Personality" Won for Lady Astor

The Candidate, Not Politics, the Issue, Says London Paper

By Fred B. Pitney

"I AM not a man of words. I am a woman of action," said Lady Nancy Astor when she was asked to stand for Parliament for the Sutton division of Plymouth, the seat made vacant by the elevation of her husband to the peerage through the death of his father, the late Viscount Astor.

And there is not one among her friends but will tell you that in those two sentences she summed up her career from the time she played football in Virginia to the day she took her seat in the House of Commons.

"I never hoped and never wanted to go into Parliament," she told her hearers in one of her election meetings in Plymouth.

Doubtless. Virginia has long been the "Mother of Presidents," but it has only now become "mother of women members of the House of Commons," and what reason could a Virginia girl have had for expecting to become a member of Parliament? But when the opportunity offered she jumped into the fight and won, for, to quote her again, "I loved political life because it enabled me to get things done."

It is a remarkable thing she has done now—to make an American girl the first woman to take a seat in the British Parliament. How did she do it? The correspondent of "The London Daily Telegraph," who followed the election in Plymouth, says it is personality, and her friends will agree with him. "The Telegraph's" correspondent says:

"The short fact is that the election is being dominated not by politics but by personality—the personality of a somewhat enigmatical woman. It is Lady Astor's election.

Just "Nancy"

"I have rarely known meetings that broke up so thoroughly refreshed, with the feeling that all had been having a good time. It is a triumph of personality which is carrying Nancy Astor—everybody so calls her here—along the tide of success. No meetings are so packed as hers, no figure in the streets engages so much attention as herself."

Her old friends, those who knew her as a little girl in Virginia, speak of her in the same way as this British newspaper man, seeing her for the first time. One of her old playmates said:

"She was always different from the rest of us. She never did things in order to be spectacular, although very often what she did was spectacular. It just happened that Nanny's natural inclinations went that way. Her tongue was as quick as the rest of her young body. None was spared her good-natured sallies. She could, however, be just as caustic as she was kind. She was a good sport above all. Nothing enraged her so greatly as to have a decision of any sort based on prejudice instead of in justice."

An Englishman, trying to describe her, said:

"She's got a punch in both ends of her tongue, and in Parliament or out she will always be one of the most influential women in the United Kingdom."

The Langhornes

Twenty-odd years ago Lady Astor, then Nanny Langhorne, was riding to hounds over the Virginia hills. She was one of the "five beautiful Langhornes," daughters of Colonel Chiswell Dabney Langhorne, of Mirador, Albemarle County, Virginia. The Langhornes had beauty, wit and spirit galore, but not much money. One does not need much money in Virginia, however, if one comes of the right stock. A little money goes a long way. And blood was another thing the Langhornes had in plenty. Not that they were an impoverished family, either. But a small fortune spreads out pretty thin when it has to cover five daughters.

Old friends of the family say that it is to her father she owes her present position. It was he who taught her that conventions were made to protect the slow-minded and do not exist for the audacious and nimble-tongued. Colonel Langhorne loved nothing in the world so much as to do or say something convention told him should not be done or said. Nanny was her father's chum, and from him she learned in their long cross-country rides to use her tongue to best effect, and from him, also, she learned the perfect naturalness and simplicity of speech that has always been one of her greatest charms. "Airs," or what the English call "side" or "swank," she learned to despise, as she despises any attempt to display a superior knowledge.

Moreover, back of all her lightness and gayety there was a deep sense of responsibility that has led one of her friends to say:

"The false impression is often gained that Nanny Langhorne has no depth, that she is superficially clever and sparkling; that there is nothing below the surface. That is the impression that a good many people of her type give. But it is not a true one. Nanny Langhorne has a fine mind, made the more attractive by the sparks of fire of which she is capable. Her sincerity and loyalty to principles and her fine appreciation of human values are rare indeed."

A Good Nurse

Another friend illustrated by a tale of Nanny's youth.

"It was no unusual thing," she said, "for Nanny Langhorne to act as nursemaid when she thought the situation demanded it. She would go into a train, dressed as the Langhorne girls knew how to dress, and find a tired old mother wearily taking care of half a dozen children. Nanny would look at the woman, then at the young tribe of unwashed youngsters, and decide immediately that there was something she could do in the way of evening up things a bit. In spite of the expostulations of the embarrassed mother she would bundle the children off into another section of the car and tell the mother to take a nap. Nanny took care of the children. And she loved it."

But by and by it came time for the Langhorne girls to marry. Elizabeth, the eldest daughter, was the first to take a husband. She married T. Moncure Perkins, of Richmond, and died several years ago. That was before the days when it had become fashionable for daughters of the Confederacy to marry men of the North. But when Nanny's turn came she went directly into the stronghold of the Abolitionists.

She was married in 1897 to Robert Gould Shaw 2d, of Boston, a Harvard man and representative of an old New England family. The wedding took place at Mirador, and soon afterward the young couple went to live in Boston. Shaw was a famous polo player in his day on the fields, and it was Nanny's riding that first attracted him, after which he soon fell a victim to her wit and beauty. Nanny continued her career on the hunting fields, begun with the Albemarle, Deep Run and Norfolk hunts in Virginia, and she and her husband were soon among the leaders at Myopia and Meadow Brook. It was at the latter place that she became the warm friend of Mrs. John Jacob Astor, a friendship that was of great value to her later in England.

One may understand that there were reasons why the marriage was not happy. At any rate, soon after the birth of her son, Robert Gould Shaw 3d, Mrs. Shaw went back to her father's home in Virginia, and in 1903 obtained a divorce on the ground of desertion for three years, which is a satisfactory cause in the Virginia courts, and avoided all the unpleasantness and much of the notoriety that might have been necessary in another state.

Phyllis Weds

Meanwhile the third sister, Phyllis, had been married. She was maid of honor at Nancy's wedding to Mr. Shaw and was introduced by Mrs. Shaw to Northern society, where she achieved a veritable triumph in Newport and New York. She met Reginald Brooks, a yachtsman, polo player and hunter of big game, all of which appealed to the outdoor Langhorne girls, and they were married in 1901 at the Brandon Hotel, Basic City, Va., eight miles from Mirador. Colonel Langhorne engaged the hotel and used it for the entertainment of the wedding guests, who came from all parts of the country.

Mrs. Brooks separated from her husband in 1912 and divorced him three years later. She married, in June, 1917, Robert H. Brand, a partner in the banking firm of Lazard Frères, of London.

Soon after her divorce from Mr. Shaw, Nanny Langhorne went to England with Mrs. John Jacob Astor and the two maintained a hunting establishment at Melton Mowbray. Nanny soon became noted for her riding, but she had a harder time to gain admittance to society in other walks. Her unconventionality made no appeal there. She went unattended one afternoon to a garden party, and, after having run the gamut of a row of gleaming lorgnettes, was greeted by a very fashionable personage with the remark:

"My dear, where is your chaperon?"

Nanny replied that she had no chaperon.

"It was broad daylight," she said, "and I did not think a chaperon was necessary. I'm beginning to think, though," she continued, "that I should have brought a policeman."

Favorite of the King

King Edward, who was then on the throne, heard, as he had a habit of doing, of these attempts of the peerage to snub the young American, and King Edward had an especial fondness for Americans. He had met Mrs. Shaw and taken a great fancy to her, and he proceeded to invite himself to tea at Mrs. Astor's, where Mrs. Shaw was a guest.

When the King invites himself to tea or any other affair he chooses his own guests and sends out his own invitations. On the afternoon that King Edward came to tea Mrs. Astor's house was crowded with the most fashionable people in London. The King had attended to that very well. And as it was his purpose to make Nanny Langhorne somebody in British society he gave her a great deal of his time. She was at her best, and their conversational sallies and repartee filled the part of the room where they were.

The man who tells the story says:

"This did not suit the pleasure of the ladies of the land. They decided to break up the party of two. Bridge was suggested. Nanny smiled and said she did not know how to play cards. The ladies insisted. Now, Nanny honestly did not know how to play bridge, but she did know how to amuse the King, and she had no intention of being bored when it was so easy to avoid it. With her most fascinating smile she declared she could not tell one card from another, and added quickly: 'Why, I don't even know a king from a knave.' King Edward laughed heartily. The ladies fled, and Nanny was firmly established in the royal good graces. After that she was not long in winning her way into the heart of the King's England."

Naturally, rumors soon began to fly about of her engagement to numerous men. The most persistent ones connected her with Robert Goelet and Lord Revelstoke, the bachelor head of the banking house of Baring Brothers and one of the best catches in England. But in 1905 Nanny returned home for the marriage of her sister Irene to Charles Dana Gibson.

Irene's Wedding

Irene Langhorne has been accounted the most beautiful of the "five beautiful Langhornes." It is she who has inspired many of Charles Dana Gibson's pictures of American women. Like her sisters, she rode to hounds and displayed also marked talent as an amateur actress and singer. When she was brought out in New York Ward McAllister, then the arbiter of New York society, asked her to lead the cotillon with him at the Patriarchs Ball, and any one whose memory goes back to the beginning of this century, Ward McAllister, the elder Mrs. John Jacob Astor and the glories and heartburnings of the Patriarchs Ball at the Waldorf-Astoria knows what that means. Irene Langborne had been placed on a throne than which one could mount no higher.

In May, 1905, she was married to Charles Dana Gibson at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Richmond. Nanny Langhorne Shaw went back to England and rumor soon began to settle definitely on an attachment between her and Waldorf Astor, eldest son of William Waldorf Astor.

On March 8, 1906, a cable dispatch from his daughter to Colonel Langhorne in Richmond authorized the announcement of her engagement to Waldorf Astor. They were married May 3, 1906, in All Souls' Church, Langham Place, London. Illness kept the elder Astor from being present. Three of the bride's sisters attended her, and she was given away by Charles Dana Gibson. The bridegroom's younger brother was best man.

This marriage is apparently what the unconscious training of her earlier years had been preparing Nanny Langhorne for. Waldorf Astor was a serious young man who was determined to conquer a place for himself. Nanny Langhorne was just the one to help him. Without sacrificing an iota of her wit and brilliance, her independence and defiance of conventions, which, on the contrary, she made serve her, she brought out the strong, underlying, solid foundations of her character.

Helpmeet and Wife

The same desire to help the mother with six children in the train, of which her old friend spoke, found a chance for free expression now that she had the Astor millions at her command. Waldorf Astor wanted to enter Parliament, and the Conservatives were persuaded to let him stand for the Sutton division of Plymouth. Nancy Astor immediately took Plymouth under her wing. She campaigned with her husband at elections, but far more than that she campaigned the year round in Plymouth. It was with her not merely a question of winning elections. She learned what the lives of the working people of Plymouth were, and the serious work of her life became the alleviating of those conditions, not only for the people of Plymouth, but for all England.

"She always hated the term charity," said her old friend "She hated the things it implied. And yet I believe there is no other woman on the other side who has the reputation she has of taking care of folks."

That was what Nancy Astor did in Plymouth. She took care of folks. She went into their houses and talked to them. She became their friend. She learned what they wanted and what they needed and helped them to get it. She helped them to get good food and clean conditions of living. She established day nurseries where the mothers could leave their young children during the hours the mothers were earning a living. And when Waldorf Astor was elected to Parliament Nancy Astor and her husband took up the fight for clean, pure milk for the poor people of England and made it their own.

But while she was building up a name and a following in Plymouth she was not less busy in London. She reached a point of great power in British politics, and her house became a recognized rendezvous for the best known men in political life. In January, 1914, she gave a week-end party at Cliveden, which included Mr. and Mrs. Asquith, Arthur J. Balfour, Mr. and Mrs. Win- [illegible] ford and Lady Beresford, Lord Roberts, Sir Horace Plunkett and J. L. Garvin. After dinner there was a debate between Winston Churchill and J. L. Garvin. In the course of it Mr. Churchill declared he had his finger on the pulse of the European situation and that five days before war was declared the English fleet would be lined up in the Channel in full war strength ready to protect the country.

Nancy Astor was also ready. Her husband went into the army and became Major Astor. She went to work for the soldiers. The magnificent Astor estate of Cliveden, Taplow, one of the finest along the Thames, was turned into a hospital and rest cure, and she did not spare herself at nursing and visiting and cheering up the sick and wounded soldiers. After America went into the war she could be found two evenings a week at an American officers' club and two other evenings were passed at a club for enlisted men, where she could be seen sitting on the floor playing the ukulele. She is said to be the only member of the British peerage who has mastered that instrument.

Nora Last to Wed

Nora Langhorne, the last of the five sisters to be married, went over to England to help her. Nora Langhorne was brought out in London in 1906, the year Nanny married Waldorf Astor. During the following season it was rumored she had received an offer of marriage from Prince Francis of Teck, Queen Mary's brother. She married, in 1909, Paul Phipps, a London architect. The wedding took place in St. James's Episcopal Church, in New York, and Mr. Phipps settled in this city to pursue his profession. When the war came, in 1914, he returned at once to England and entered the army, and his wife followed soon afterward to join her sister in work for the soldiers.

Nancy Astor was undoubtedly right when she told her Plymouth election audience, "I never hoped and never wanted to go into Parliament." Circumstances forced it on her. But she was ready for circumstance, which is something that finds so many others wanting.

She was prepared to go on bringing up her five children and helping her husband win his elections while she watched over the poor people of Plymouth. But William Waldorf Astor, who had been raised to the peerage and made Viscount Astor of Hever Castle, died. Automatically Nancy's husband became a peer and lost his seat in the Commons. The seat had to be filled. Captain Jack Astor, younger brother of Waldorf Astor, was asked to stand for the division. He refused, despite all entreaties, and the party turned to Lady Nancy.

There were two other candidates for the place, a Liberal and a Laborite. Lady Nancy was a Coalition- [illegible]

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"The Beautiful Langhorne Sisters"

Upper left, Mrs. Charles Dana Gibson; center, Lady Astor; Upper right, Mrs. Robert H. Brand; Lower, Mrs. Paul Phipps.

The Former Virginia Girl's Campaign Interested All England

a runaway fight of it, setting a pace the others could follow with difficulty.

Lady Nancy began by making Churchwood, the ruddy-faced, rotund old coachman who had served the Astor family through three political battles, the director general of her campaign. Silk-hatted and officious executives of the Unionist party held council daily and drafted the candidate's strategic moves, but it was Churchwood—also silk-hatted though less officious—who really determined whether those plans should be executed or vetoed.

Lady Nancy would enter her carriage in the morning, Churchwood would whip up the elegant pair of sorrels and the candidate would roll away, unmindful of whither she was bound. If Churchwood from his vantage point saw a street corner gathering or a lowly abode where Lady Nancy might get a hearing, he would rein in the horses without asking leave and let her do the rest.

During the campaign her ready wit and quick tongue made her famous throughout England, and her clever sayings soon came to be known as "Astorisms," while she was affectionately called "Nancy" by high and low.

Some "Astorisms"

Nancy showed her fighting spirit at her first meeting. She was introduced by Viscount Astor, who explained why he had to give up the seat and let his wife try for it. The Laborites soon got to work heckling him, and he became so disconcerted that Nancy abruptly pulled him down into his seat, and, taking his place, said: "I have been handling soldiers for the last four years. You better watch out. I just want to tell you some things I am going to get done if I get into the House of Commons. What's more, I am going to get there. Just remember that."

"A confident person never wins," cried one interrupter.

"Never mind," retorted Nancy, "a faint-hearted man has never got there."

"The London Daily Telegraph" correspondent quotes the following as typical of her sayings:

"It has been said electricity was always there, but it took Edison to discover it. It is the same with the hearts of men and women. The good is always there if only we bring it out."

She was always after the Socialists, whom she dislikes extremely.

"You had better take a fighting woman if you can't get a fighting man," she told one crowd. "I prefer the Union Jack to the red flag."

Another time she said: "I am ready to meet the whole of the Independent Labor party alone on Salisbury Plain, because they can't or won't fight."

She advocated a censorship for movie films, and refused to be disconcerted when she was accused of being a prohibitionist.

Opposed Drink

"I have never been asked to stand as a 'pussyfoot' candidate, nor have I any intention of doing so," she said.

Lady Nancy was returned to Parliament with a plurality of 5,000. There was a good deal of talk about how she would dress in her attendance at the House, but she soon silenced that.

"I shall dress very simply," she said. "A black skirt with a white shirtwaist and a black coat, with possibly a little white at the collar and cuffs. I am not going to set a precedent that will make other women hesitate to follow me."

She kept her word, and when she appeared in the House for the first time last Monday she was all in black, except for a touch of white at the collar and cuffs. It was a historic occasion in the House, and not only the whole House but all England was on tiptoe for it. Lady Nancy was sponsored by Premier Lloyd George and Arthur J. Balfour, both of whom had backed her campaign, although she had said, "I will be for Lloyd George just as long as I think he is right."

With a hand on the arm of each, Lady Nancy came in and was led to the Speaker's chair. The House buzzed with a low murmur of applause as she mounted the footstool before the Speaker and took the oath and then stopped for a minute's chat with the Speaker. Austen Chamberlain was the only member who tried to speak to her as she withdrew after taking the oath. She was the [illegible]